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ABSTRACT

Established in 1894, the Naugatuck (Connecticut) Women's Study Club is an example of the women's groups that seemed to spring up simultaneously in the late 19th century across the United States. Founded for the purpose of "promoting general intelligence and culture," these clubs were established by pillars of the community and included the wives of ministers, doctors, and other professionals. Women would get together to enlarge their worlds through the study of books--primarily those focused on the arts, literature, and history. The Naugatuck club began its first year with a study of "travel"--Italy was the country chosen and Genoa, the first city "visited." Like other study clubs, at Naugatuck the women researched and wrote papers to be presented to the membership, and at times, discussions, musicales, and dramatic presentations were included as part of the yearly schedule. Naugatuck celebrated its 100th anniversary in 1994 and boasts members of 40 and 50 years duration--it bears examination to study how women exercise leadership, value education, find ways to educate themselves, and use their educations as part of their larger living in and contributing to the world. In the case of Naugatuck, the women are serious and committed to their learning. These study clubs continue to provide a special way of relating for women, of talking to one another, of exploring, of placing priority on intellectual activity as a unique aspect of experience. It will perhaps provide another alternative view of women's ways of knowing. (NKA)

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Susan Tchudi

Women's Education: The Rhetoric of History and Serious Purpose of the Naugatuck Women's Study Club

Established in 1894, The Naugatuck (Connecticut) Women's Study Club has much in common with other women's groups that seemed to spring up simultaneously in the late nineteenth century across the U.S. Like many of its sister clubs, the Naugatuck Study Club was established to "promote general intelligence and culture." Women invited to join the club were expected to demonstrate, "interest in study, loyalty to the traditions of the club and conscientious attendance at all meetings." The Naugatuck Study Club was like other clubs, too, in that it was established by pillars in the community, the landed Whittemores--specifically Mrs. J.H. Whittemore and her sister, Miss Ellen Spenser--whose family gift of a library to the town of Naugatuck--assured the closing of the library on Tuesday afternoon for xx years so that the women's study club could meet. The Naugatuck Women's Study Club was also quite typical in its inclusion during its early years of white middle-class women, the wives of ministers, doctors, and and other professionals, and in later years, of highly educationed white collar managers. The procedures and structure of this women's club was also common. Women would get together to enlarge their worlds through the study of books--primarily those focused on the arts, literature, and history. The Naugatuck club begin its first year with a study of "travel"--"Italy was the country chosen and Genoa, the first city visited." (Mrs. Canby Throckmorton, 10/16/84) Like other study clubs, women researched and wrote papers to be presented to the membership, and during different times in its history included discussions, musicales, and dramatic presentations as a part of its yearly schedule. Unlike the thousands of other study clubs that have disappeared in the 20th century, however, this study club celebrated its 100th in anniversary in 1994 and boasts members who have been a part of study club, giving papers for 40 and 50 and more years. And while many clubs

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established in the 19th Century permutated into organizations devoted to societal reform and civic leadership, this club maintained an emphasis on education, culture, and personal self-improvement. My interest in this organization and others like it is a continuation of the quest of researchers in women's studies over the past 15 to 20 years who've studied the role of women leadership, culture, and education--to look at the ways women value education, find ways to educate themselves, and see their educations as a part of their larger living in and contributing to the world.

In her excellent study of late 19th century and early 20th century women's study clubs, Theodora Penny Martin describes the shift in the complex social roles of women that creates the rise and decline of the women's study club movement. Although women's clubs in America can be traced to the early 18th century, or for some the end of the 19th Century, it was in the 1860s, following the Civil War, that women came into a new recognition of their skills and abilities and the club movement blossomed. During the War, the Union's Sanitary Commission provided a range of support services for the military, staffing hospitals, raising money for supplies required by Union soldiers, manufacturing good for soldiers, and caring for families and wounded veterans. Through this activity, women found and developed satisfaction and self-respect and learned about their own capabilities and leadership skills. At the end of the War, these skills coupled with a new leisure occasioned by time-saving, work-saving domestic inventions provided women in new new options. Women created study clubs for other reasons, as well, according to Martin. The War had disrupted old hierarchies and familiar social patterns. The country was becoming more mobile, entrepreneurs were able to make money creating a new economic, and a new wave of immigrants challenged patterns of social organization. Women's study clubs provided both stability, "a smaller, orderly society where traditional community values could be express and affirmed" (17). Education was still highly restricted for women following

the War, still supported by views that women were too refined, too fragile, or too pure for education or for public life.

This view of women and women's access to education and public life changed dramatically in the twenty years following the war, however. Martin reports that in 1870 women were only permitted entrance to 239 of the 582 colleges and universities in existence. By 1890, the number admitted women had increased to 682, 22% more. In 1870, 11, 000 women were enrolled in colleges and universities; by 1890, 56,000 were enrolled. During this same period of time women's study club membership rose and then declined as women's opportunities both in school and in public life enlarged. In her study of women's transition at the turn of the century, Margaret Wilson found that 5000 organizations had joined the Federation of Women's Clubs in 1906, but that that was only five to ten ppercent of the clubs in existence, making a number of 25,000 to 50,000 the estimate of clubs in operation. As women took on more and more significant leadership roles, their professional opportunities increased as well. According to Martin, between 1890 and 1920, the number of professional women rose 226 percent (175). It was also during this time that many women's clubs turned from literary and cultural concerns to civic reform and activism. The growth, development, and new directions of women's clubs during these years is well doumented in studies by Martin, Blair, Gere, Roth, and Steinschneider. What has happened since the early 20th Century has received less attention.

At the moment, I am about half way through the research for a book-length study of women's study clubs, looking at two women's study clubs--The Naugatuck Women's Study Club and the Questers of Richland, Washington--using archival and oral history techniques to learn about the nature of the literacy experience of these women and the processes by which they maintain and uphold the original values of the study club ideal. These two organizations (there are others) have preserved the notion of growth

through study as their central purpose.

At their ninetieth anniversary celebration in 1984, the members of the Naugatuck Club were addressed by Mrs. Canby Throckmorton, a British researcher, who reminded the members of the value of their work:

I must tell you that among the most highly recommended study groups across the depth and breadth of your land and throughout the British Isles, you do stand out as a jewel, - a shining example of what a ladies study club should be. Reading the minutes of former anniversaries, historians reports, and a generous sampling of individual papers, (many of them masterpieces), you have woven, like a tapestry, a complete picture of time and change from the world your founders knew until the present. What was comparatively simple is now horribly complex, but none of the complexities seem to daunt your young members -- or the ones with the silver hair. Your papers show intensive research and most intelligent interpretation of the facts. You have indeed promoted general intelligence and culture! " (3) "In examining your memoirs throughout the years, I have a --well,- an unshakeable conviction that each new president of the club becomes a visible link in an unbroken chain that binds the past to the future and that ALL members share alike in the heritage passed on by your founders" (4). Mrs. Throckmorton ends her remarks thus, "I charge you: preserve your traditions and standards, ever pursue knowledge and share it. You can't enter antiquity before you are 200, so on this day I congratulate you on reaching a youthful 90! May your "ship of culture" sail on --- and on --- and on!" (5) (Throckmorton, 10/16/84).

For contemporary members of Naugatuck Women's Study Club, the connection with history seems to be a major force in their continuation. The "rehearsal" of the study club's past is a constant in anniversary celebrations. Their desire to be connected is obvious. But these women are interested in more than simply

maintaining history; how else could one go through the pain of writing 30, 40, 50 papers over the years? These twin interests in the maintenance of study club can be seen in the language of the women. The language which maintains the Naugatuck Study Club, I call The Rhetoric of Historical Roots and the Rhetoric of Serious Purpose.

One obvious piece of linguistic evidence of the desire to maintain historical connections with the past is the ubiquity of the Whittemore name. Of course, all of the histories of the organization mention the Whittemores not only as strategic in establishing the Study Group, but as larger community benefactors--the big house on the hill sort of reference. Their large financial contributions which include the creation of the library and their financing of the church are mentioned frequently in women's historical accounts of Study Club.

Another ubiquitous historical reference is to the Good Old Days when when women wore hats and gloves. The reference to this formal period in the history of study club is manifested in continued emphasis on proper form and maintenance of tradition. A couple women I interviewed attribute the decline of hats to the bouffant hairdo; all of them (to a person) mentioned that in the old days, of course, we wore hats and gloves.

Today, this emphasis on tradition takes other forms. Interestingly, some current traditions emphasize formality more now than they did 50 or 60 years ago. For example, when the Club was initiated, there was more opportunity for discussion. In fact, some of the early programs were devoted exclusively to discussion. A list of references was given, the women would do some background reading, and then they would come together to discuss the ideas. Although I haven't yet found information regarding the nature of the discussions--whether or not they we're heated or controversial, I do know that interaction was an important part of early study club activity. However, in the past 50 plus years, there has been no time built into study

club meetings for interaction. There is no time for members of the club to ask questions of the speaker, no time for a discussion of the issues, no time built into the meeting for anything other than a business meeting followed by the reading of three twenty minute papers. When I asked women about their opinions about this format, I received various replies. Most of the women I talked to liked the format as it was, though some theoretically would like a time to discuss. The reason for this format was sometimes simply that "we've always done it this way." But others gave more concrete reasons. One said there simply was not time. With the number of meetings, the number of members, and the amount of time allotted to each paper, one women said, there simply wasn't time to talk about the papers. Perhaps, she suggested, as membership declined (which it is) they could have two rather than three papers a day and allow for talk. More typical reasons given for excluding discussion were 1) the insecurity of the women about their knowledge about their topics; and 2) the fear that women would "get on a soapbox." The first worry reflects the criticism of some, historically directed toward the superficiality of women's study clubs, that is, that women took extremely complex topics and reduced them to a simplistic rehearsal of basic information. Women's fears that they wouldn't know enough to answer questions might lend credence to the criticism of some that study club research is superficial. This defensiveness might have grown in part from the well-known New Yorker cartoons of Helen Hockinson. (SHOW AN EXAMPLE on OVERHEAD) The second issue--that women might get on their soapboxes--gives evidence of another issue I'll come back to--and that is that the organization is one which seeks to maintain status quo social attitudes and smooth social relations.

The tradition of the study club has been fiercely maintained in its physical set-up as well. For the first 60-70 years of their existence, study club met on Tuesday afternoons in the library, which was closed specifically for them. When the town grew

so much that the library felt the need to have that time available for patrons, the women's study club moved to the Congregational Church, of which the Whittemores were patrons. There they have met in the Parish House with only few changes of venue for special occasions. Moreover, the prospectus, the yearly program for the study club has maintained the identical format for 100 years. Only in the first year was there not a prospectus. With the exception of only one year, women have been identified in the prospectus through their married names, i.e., Mrs. John Smith; unmarried women are identified as Miss Rose Jones. When I asked women why they were identified in the 19xx prospectus by their given names, and why they changed back, no one could remember. A one-year anomaly. In addition, women's presentations are formal affairs with business and papers delivered from behind the podium.

Of course, older women in the study group--and those are the ones I've focused on in the early part of my research since some of them in their late seventies and eighties are very frail indeed--place much greater emphasis on the maintenance of tradition than younger members. One member in her late seventies bemoans the behavior of the current president, a woman in her forties, a study club member for nearly twenty years. Both the president and her critic have described for me the older woman's admonishing the younger for not following the traditional meeting procedures, for sitting rather than standing at the podium to conduct meetings, and for sitting improperly so you can see all the way up to . . . . Although women see the need to be up-to-date and to have fresh ideas and younger women in the organization, their ties to history are extremely powerful, present, and heartfelt.

The rhetoric of history also includes another aspect of the club's continuation and tradition: honoring elders: The immediate past president of the organization accounts for her own involvement in that way: "I think part of the reason I've been

doing it is because I've seen a lot of people who I respect who are getting older and I'm involved in a lot of organizations, many with the elderly and I guess for the last few years I've seen it sort of like A volunteer job. . . . It was really important for people who I respected to get it to be 100 years old. And I felt that if people like me who hated doing all the writing quit, that it was just sort of a . . . it was a nice way to honor those people and keep their self-esteem, to keep them involved in something that was somewhat intellectual. Another member maintains active involvement in part as a tribute to her mother who was a study club member for most of her adult life.

The rhetoric of history runs throughout the language of study club members, but I think that the organization's continuation can be attributed to another source: What Martin has called Mind Hunger. Helen Hotkinson's cartoons are one example of the satircal barbs directed toward study clubs, and a look at the prospectuses can cause one to question the depth of exploration or scholarship women were engaged in. (OVERHEAD OF PROSPECTUS PAGES) However, such a view would underestimate the depth and nature of the commitment that women have made to in some cases the arduous process of writing a paper. The language women use when they talk about study club reveals a Rhetoric of Serious Purpose.

In talking about paper assignments and the development of papers, women use the words "deep" and "light." They appreciate deep papers and "good minds, " though They talk about the challenge of writing a paper and the self-discipline required. Many of the women I talked to joined study club when they had small children and they desired an adult activity, an alternative to talking with young children and caring for babies. One woman talked about "the golden era" of study club when the board--the group which assigns the papers--was a "good board and they planned deep papers, and not so much philosophy but the literature was covered quite well and scientific papers, I think." Women consider some papers "light" and inappropriate for study club.

"I do not believe in study club having a paper on quilting, and we have. And I think one lady brought in handymaking supplies. That to me belongs to a craft group rather than a study group. And we tended to have one or two papers a year after that, so I felt that we had gone backwards in our selection. I think we really should look forward to what is brand new in the sciences and keep up with everything."

"Keeping up" on the world around them is an important part of the the rhetoric of study club. Another women felt the major strength of study club was "addressing the issues of the day," so that "we were current all the way, so that we kept up with the national issues and the countries around the world, what they were doing. And Issues around the world." Another woman said that "the whole study club aspect gives you a whole idea of what's going on in the world as you go to the meetings and hear the papers. And then as I say, some of them I've been interested enough that I've gone and read more." I asked one woman--a musician most of whose contributions to study club have been musical--why she kept up membership in study club for over fifty years. "It just keeps me up on my toes. Not just musically, but other ways too. I mean I've heard about things that I would have had no way of knowing."

Naugatuck Study Club's prohibition against socializing--though not a part of the original founding principles of the organization--has become so strong in women's language and conceptualizing of the club as to have almost reached taboo status. Study club is not tea or chit-chat time. Bi-weekly meetings of study club include no coffee, snacks or built in social hour. Women may chat a bit as they take their seats before the business meeting, and again before taking leave, but such practices are not institutionalized in the scheduled meeting time. In recent years a Christmas tea has been added to the fifty-plus year tradition of a May tea. Women's insistence that club time is serious business is reflected in language, dress, demeanor and the schedule.

When I asked about the process of researching and writing women I learned

that serious purpose also exacts a price. Women admitted their insecurities about their abilities: At various points in her interview one woman revealed that "I'm not accomplished writer," "I've never done any writing in depth," "I'm not that talented," "I'm certainly no scholar," and that there were papers "that were probably intellectually beyond me." Writing she says, "challenges me, intrigues me." "And," she says, "it's a self discipline . . . and I think you use everything you have, your mind, your talents, your intuition." (Annalee) When I asked about the ease of writing a paper, another woman answered, "No, I wouldn't exactly say it's easy because I have never felt that I was as competent as many of the people in study club, if you want to know the truth. I mean I used to find it extremely difficult and nerve racking and so forth. Now I more or less have the attitude that we all do the best we can and that I'm doing the best I can and I don't worry about it. I don't have the emotion stress that I had; the first few papers were horrid. Well, I spent many sleepless nights over the first few papers." Women who were considered accomplished are held up as models. So and so reads a great deal; so and so read deeply.

At the same time women are serious and committed to their learning, however, they are reluctant to commit themselves to a position or an opinion. Fair mindedness and neutrality are commensurate concepts for women in study club. When I asked about controversy in study club, I was in part assuming that given their emphasis on keeping up with the times, women must at times find themselves in some controversial issues. Controversy would almost appear to be an anathema to these women, a state to be fiercely avoided. "Study club," said one member "has been a very pleasant experience because people have very seldom disagreed." Listeners "just accept, and they accept the research that people have done and take their word for what they're saying." I asked if this was because of a format that does not allow for feedback. She admitted that the format had influence but also that "you don't want to stir the pot

because you don't want to offend and therefore you don't take issue. And whether you disagree violently with someone, you wouldn't bring it up." Even though she admitted that she argued outside study club "on everything else, believe me, and have opinions on everything else, but study club is very compatible and harmonious really, and they don't take issue with what people say." One woman attributes the lack of controversy to the board screening out the slant on the paper that would make it controversial. She herself avoids taking a stand. "When I get into an argument, this generally happens with a 90-year-old-friend I have in weaving, she gets a little provoked, because I try to see both sides, and she is so adamant on things. I guess that's a red flag to me, but I try to see, just think who's reading the paper, what the background is. I don't think I ever get up on a soapbox."

While many women's study clubs permutated into volunteer organizations which saw service is the natural extension of learning about the world, the Naugatuck Study Club not only fiercely maintained the traditional study focus of the group, but in many ways became more rigid in its adherence to rules than the organization of more formal time. Most of the women I interviewed, however, are extemely active volunteers--for the hospital, for Red Cross, in nursing homes, and in local, regional and national church organizations. They are another version of Women-Who-Do-It-All. Study club, born of a need for intellectual activity when women had few formal intellectual opportunities, seems to continue both in a desire to maintain a long, historically complex tradition (how much of this is New England?) and perhaps in a stronger desire--especially for the older women--to be well-informed. Interestingly, a spin off organization founded in 1968 is an interesing amalgam of the Naugatuck strictures and a desire to make information vital and entertaining.

Women's lives have changed a great deal in the past 100 years. They have increasing access to jobs, to education, to organizations that promote the welfare of

women. Nonetheless, study clubs--for at least some women--continue to provide a special way of relating for women, of talking to each other, of exploring, of placing priority on intellectual activity as a unique aspect of experience. I want to learn more about what this learning is and how it augments women's lives. I think it will provide another, perhaps alternative, view of women's ways of knowing.

All citations from the papers in the archives of the Naugatuck Women's Study Club and from interviews with study club members.

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